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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted (1) to investigate whether adult observers would label the same stimulus behavior in young children differently according to both their own gender and the gender of the children, and (2) to explore differential labeling by respondents' ethnicity. In addition, demographic variables for respondents (such as age, education level, and contact with children) were investigated. After viewing a 14-minute film of a white child and a black child playing spontaneously, 120 black and 120 white subjects were asked to evaluate toddler behaviors on a 12-item Likert-type scale of adjective pairs. Each toddler was presented as being either male or female in four different treatment conditions. Gender and ethnicity were combined into one variable having four levels: black females, black males, white females, and white males. A significant interaction between the toddlers and treatment condition was shown for the dependent variable "handsome-beautiful," thus demonstrating that the procedures and instrument were sensitive enough to pick up statistically significant differences in viewer perceptions. The remaining 11 variables were examined via MANOVA. Although no significant interactions occurred, a toddler effect was found to be significant. Because a significant group effect was evident, two additional three-factor repeated-measures MANOVAs were run. Both gender and ethnicity were found to be significant. The function of observer characteristics in labeling behavior was discussed. (RH)

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PERCEPTIONS OF TODDLER BEHAVIOR: GENDER AND ETHNIC EFFECTS

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Running Head: PERCEPTIONS OF TODDLERS

Abstract

One hundred twenty Black and 120 White subjects were asked to evaluate toddler behaviors on a Likert-type scale after viewing a 14-minute film of a White child and a Black child playing spontaneously. Each toddler was presented as both a male and a female in four different treatment conditions. Gender and ethnicity were combined into one variable, called group, with four levels. The dependent variable "handsome-beautiful" showed a significant interaction between the toddlers and treatment condition, demonstrating that the procedures and instrument were sensitive enough to pick up statistically significant differences in viewer perceptions. The remaining 11 variables were examined via MANOVA. Although no significant interactions occurred, a toddler effect was significant. Because there was also a significant group effect, two additional three-factor repeated measures MANOVAs were run. Both gender and ethnicity were found to be significant. The function of observer characteristics in labeling behavior was discussed.

PERCEPTIONS OF TODDLER BEHAVIOR

GENDER AND ETHNIC EFFECTS

Throughout each person's life -- from womb to tomb, so to speak -- everyone gets described in various ways in a variety of situations by a multitude of other people. Adjectives are the common descriptors used to communicate behavioral characteristics of children and adults in reductionistic terms. At times judgments about placement, punishment, and promotion --- to name but a few possibilities --- are then made based on the descriptions developed. What remains unclear is whether the descriptors used tell more about the person being observed or the observer.

One factor in particular, attractiveness, has received considerable attention of researchers who have usually used as their format photos of humans from pre-school through adulthood (Webster & Driskell, 1983 and Stephan & Langolis, 1984). In general, the more attractive the stimulus person the more often other positive descriptors were associated with the stimulus person.

However, when researchers have attempted to determine whether gender plays a significant role, either as observer or

observee, in describing humans and their behavior, results have been more mixed. In fact, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) seemed to conclude that few sex differences actually were supported by research. The authors suggested that for parents the "probability of a child's behavior being noticed" may be connected in some way to the "probability level the parent unconsciously assigns to it" (p. 345). Using the Meyer and Sobieszek (1972) study to support their speculation, the authors suggested that behaviors are especially noticed if they run counter to sex-role stereotypes. In reality that study had found few differences in descriptions of toddler behavior by adults when the child was labeled male or female.

One the other hand, Unger (1979) summarized research dealing with the effects of gender as a stimulus variable and concluded that the gender of the stimulus person affected criteria for mental health, evaluations about the causes of someone's behavior, and perceptions about the value of others. Unger pointed out that illusions about sex differences are held by both females and males. She hypothesized that the "persistent evaluation biases in our society" support "the proposition that there is no such thing as identical male and female behavior" (p. 1091). Unger (1979; 1980) has also criticized psychological research for focusing on sex

differences rather than similarities and for assuming the differences that do occur are the result of sex. In conclusion, Unger (1979) clarified the distinction between sex and gender:

> The distinction between sex and gender can assist in the generation of research hypotheses that do not assume the former is necessarily the basis for the latter. The use of the term gender makes it less likely that psychological differences between males and females will be considered explicable mainly in terms of physiological differences between them. Those who study the psychology of women are often concerned with the stimulus functions of sex---the fact that the label male or female with no additional information provided greatly alters people's view of the stimulus person described. Gender refers to the traits and behaviors considered characteristic of and appropriate to members of each sexual category (p. 1093).

At the same time, few researchers have included ethnicity as a variable in describing behavior. The few that have done so have also used photos and have obtained mixed results. In fact, one recent study (Stephan and Langolis, 1984) that used undergraduate Black, Mexican-American, and White subjects concluded that "physical attractiveness is clearly a stronger predictor of behavioral predictions than is ethnicity" (p. 584). The same study also dropped sex of baby as a factor because their preliminary analyses showed "no distinction on the basis of infant sex" (p. 578).

The present research focused on gender as a stimulus variable. Specifically, this study looked at whether the same behavior was labeled differently according to both the performer's and respondent's gender. The variable handsome-beautiful acted as a rough control for the attractiveness factor. The research also explored differential labeling by respondent's ethnicity. In addition, demographic variables, such as age, educational level, and contact with children, were investigated.

The idea for this research was based on the earlier Meyer and Sobieszek (1972) work. That study used an adjective check list, showed two 15-minute videotapes of one White child each, and included White subjects only in its sample of 85 adults. Each child was described at times as a girl and at times as a boy.

Methods

Subjects

Subjects came from several sources and locations. Community groups in northern Colorado and southern Wyoming were solicited for participation; graduate summer classes at the University of Northern Colorado were also solicited. Subjects in the latter category tended to be temporary students taking courses for recertification while subjects in the former category tended to be service club members. Black

undergraduate students were also contacted. Efforts were made to avoid using subjects still in their teems. In addition, the film and directions were taken or mailed to contact individuals on campuses and with community groups in California, Oregon, Florida, and North Carolina. The intent of that procedure was to expand the sample of Black subjects. In the process additional White subjects were obtained, thus allowing a wider pool of subjects for later matching.

Apparatus

Film. Two 14-month-old toddlers were filmed engaging in spontaneous play. The children, one Black and one White, were closely matched developmentally according to height, weight, walking ability, and motor skills and were judged to be within the same range of attractiveness. Forty minutes of black and white film were shot over a 2 1/2-hour period and later edited to 12 minutes. The final version included an equal amount of footage of each child individually and was balanced for activity level, as well as several minutes of both children in parallel play. To minimize the effects of extraneous gender identification, the toddlers were dressed in plain shirts and diapers and went barefoot during the filming. The initials J or M were pinned on the children's shirts and the appropriate letters were superimposed in the film under the appropriate child. A musical sound track was added that was balanced for tempo and activity level of the toddlers.

Instrument. Previous research was searched to find adjective pairs that had been used to describe both gender and ethnic characteristics (Brigham, 1974; Broverman, 1970; Hamilton, 1977; Hurwitz, 1975; Imada, 1979; Koblensky, 1978; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957; Sagar & Schofield, 1980; Smedley & Bayton, 1978; Smith & Millham, 1979; Stephan & Langolis, 1980). From the literature search, 46 adjective pairs were developed that had been used in previous research. These pairs (13 for gender, 13 for ethnicity, 10 for both, and 10 for neither) were then randomized and submitted to a panel of experts who had experience in issues surrounding gender and ethnic stereotyping. From the experts' ratings, 12 adjective pairs emerged with high consistency. Four pairs (handsome-beautiful, independent-dependent, sharing-selfish, and gentle-rough) seemed to be representative of assumed gender stereotypic traits; four pairs (slow-fast, bright-dull, busy-lazy, and dirty-clean) seemed to be representative of assumed ethnic stereotypic traits; three pairs (cooperative-competitive, emotional-rational, and active-passive) seemed to be representative of both classes of traits; and one pair (unpleasant-pleasant) seemed to be a neutral characteristic, representative of neither.

These 12 pairs were again randomized and placed at either end of a seven-choice Likert-type scale. One side of the page was for Baby J; directly across the page was the scale for Baby M. In addition, the cover page asked subjects to identify their gender, age, occupation, marital status, ethnicity, number of children, and contact with children.

Procedure

The film was shown to 835 subjects over a two-year period. The research was described as a children's early personality development project. Before viewing the film, participants were told its length, the type of questionnaire they would fill out, and the use of the initials J and M to identify the toddlers on the film. The children's names were said twice before showing the film. After viewing the film, the subjects were given the questionnaire and instructions for completing it, and the children's names were said again. Gender specific pronouns were also used when appropriate in the directions. In Treatment I the children were called John and Mike; in Treatment II, Jane and Mary; in Treatment III, John and Mary; and in Treatment IV, Jane and Mike.

Results

One hundred and twenty Black and 120 White subjects were randomly chosen from a subject pool of 835 subjects for analysis. It was hypothesized that the variable

"handsome-beautiful" was the most sensitive to treatment effects (i.e., gender labeling) due to the implicit gender of the words in English. Therefore, that dependent variable was subjected to a three-factor repeated measures analysis of variance. To keep the analysis model from becoming overly complex and obscuring the results, gender and ethnicity variables were combined into one variable, called group, with four levels: Black females, Black males, White females, and White males. As expected, a significant interaction between the treatment condition and toddler occurred, F (3,479) = 9.97, p .01. No other effects or interaction approached significance. This model explained 74% of the variance. Analysis of simple effects showed that the toddlers were rated as handsome or beautiful depending upon their assigned gender. These results seemed to demonstrate that the procedures and instrument were sufficiently sensitive to reflect statistically significant differences in viewers' perceptions.

The remaining 11 variables were examined via MANOVA. Estimates of F-ratios were calculated from Wilk's Lambdas. Interestingly, no significant interactions occurred. However, a significant treatment effect occurred indicating that the toddlers were seen differently when labeled as male or female, F (33, 631) = 1.54, p .05. A toddler effect was significant, demonstrating that the two children were perceived as being

different, which was not unexpected. There was a significant group effect, F (33, 631) = 2.12, p .01, which needed to be further examined. Two additional three-factor repeated measures MANOVAs were run to check for ethnic and/or gender effects. Both gender, F (11,222) = 2.89, p .01, and ethnicity, F (11,222) = 2.59, p .01, were found to be significant. Again, no significant interactions occurred; however, a gender X ethnicity interaction has not been investigated in this interim report.

Discussion

Overall, several unexpected factors may have affected the outcome in this interim progress report of the research project. Regardless of the efforts to balance the activity level of the toddlers in the film through editing, individual differences in activity level of the toddlers may still have occurred in the final film version. In addition, the instrument itself may have forced subjects to discriminate between the toddler's behavior when an adjective check list or some other format might have allowed more flexibility in responses. At this point, the effect of several different experimenters presenting the film is unknown.

The results need to be interpreted with caution due to the disproportionately high educational level of the subjects (M = 14.2 years). It may be postulated that the subjects were not

naive with respect to research procedures. For example, subjects infrequently asked any questions about the research when given the opportunity after completion of the instrument. Whether the lack of questioning infers that subjects accepted the gender of the toddlers as stated by the experimenters or that they did not want to say anything to potentially contaminate the research is, of course, unknown. One aspect of the study that White subjects did question periodically was the use of a Black child in the film. Subjectively, it seemed that some White subjects were surprised. Black subjects did not seem surprised.

The above limitations not withstanding, labeling effects were clear with the one variable not included in the multivariate analysis. If "handsome-beautiful" can be seen as a rough estimate of attractiveness, then both males and females and Blacks and Whites responded to this item on the scale in a very gender specific manner. Adults in this study were generally unwilling to label a 14-month-old toddler thought to be a girl as "handsome" and one thought to be a boy as "beautiful." It may be postulated that the assumed gender-specific qualities of the adjectives and the experimental labels assigned to the children cued the differential responses to the children and not aesthetic or physical qualities of the children themselves. Such

differential responding appears to underscore the function of the labeler rather than the labelee in the perception of traits or characteristics in others.

Consistently the toddlers were seen differently by all subjects. In addition, each toddler was rated differently by males and females. Furthermore, each toddler was viewed differently by the two ethnic groups represented by the subjects in this study. In addition, it should be emphasized that these rater differences were consistent across treatment conditions, in other words, regardless whether the toddler was labeled male or female. Because the children remained constant across treatments, only the perceptions consistently varied. This consistency of ratings certainly supports the function of the labeler in the perception of behavior. Various life experiences of males and females and Blacks and Whites may cause them to evaluate certain characteristics in dissimilar ways.

As more subjects participate in the study, further analysis will be done to determine the effect of educational level, age, and possible research sophistication. So far the MANOVA has indicated there are significant differences which need additional analysis that go beyond the focus of this interim report. From a wider pool of subjects discriminate analysis will yield more precise information.

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Author Notes

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